

insight



The Unseen World

God's Power and the Spiritual Forces at Work

The Power of God and the Unseen World
&
A Framework for Biblical Cosmology
— David Burnett

Breaking the Stalemate of Silence
Opening conversations about supernatural encounters
— Lynette Teagle

Reflections from a Taiwanese New Year
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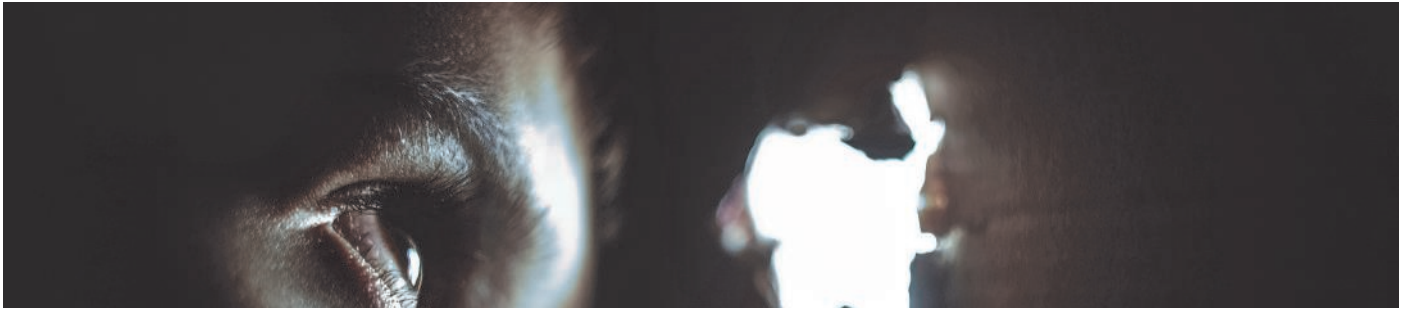
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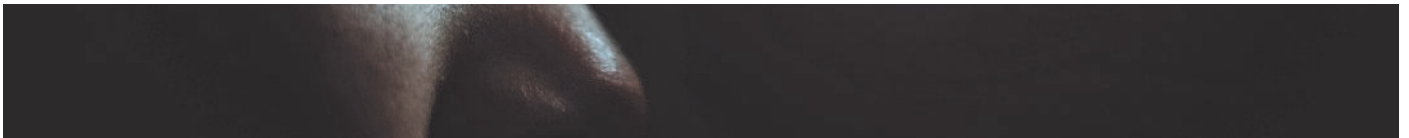
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A Word From the Editor



**Peter
Teagle**

Peter is Centre Leader for Friends International Oxford. He also preaches and teaches at CU events weeks, training events and Word Alive in his role as events speaker for international student ministry.

It's a hot potato, a sticky wicket, I wouldn't touch it with a bargepole; so why are we grasping the nettle, opening a can of worms, rushing in where angels fear to tread?

Like many who have worked with international students for many years, I am automatically careful about using culture-bound idioms in my language. And yet, when I thought about introducing the topic of dealing with unseen powers, an array of familiar English expressions sprang to mind!

Perhaps this shows how much we have in Britain a natural aversion to tackling things that we don't understand. Or more positively, that as a culture we are naturally concerned about excess or things that may lead to error, and so prefer to steer clear.

So it is not surprising, then, that in the two decades my wife and I have worked with international students, we have rarely seen these issues dealt with at all, and even more rarely do we see these issues discussed openly and directly. Indeed, calling them "these issues" is another euphemism; I am skirting the issue even now!

Yet we have two overwhelming reasons for "grasping the nettle": (a) that the Bible describes a universe in which there

are powers seen *and* unseen (Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 1:16), and (b) that the students with whom we work often experience this unseen side of life. Our desire is to bring students' fears and experiences into the light of God's truth, rather than dismissing them out of hand.

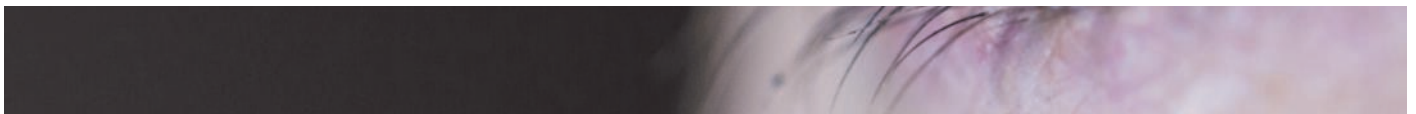
We on the *Insight* team are delighted to follow the experienced lead of David Burnett. Having spoken on dealing with unseen powers, non-Christian spiritual experience and spiritual warfare at our 2017 January conference, David adds to the teaching he gave there by zeroing in with practical points about how to deal with experiences of spirits as they arise. Lynette Teagle helps us to think about how to create a 'safe place' for students to speak about these things and not be made to feel that they are weird, crazy or silly. Sue Burt reminds us of the context from which many students come and to which they return, while demonstrating how returnee visits can prove to be rich learning experiences.

So, it is part of our duty of care to listen to the students with whom we work and use Scripture to interpret the world they experience. Thus they can be led to a fuller knowledge of Jesus who is Lord of all creation, seen and unseen, who is able to set us free from the powers of darkness and to bring us into His Kingdom of light.





The Power of God and the Unseen World



**David
Burnett**

David is the former Academic Dean at All Nations Christian College, and a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. He has served as a missionary in India, and is author of a number of distinguished books including *World of the Spirits* and *Clash of Worlds*.

Looking around the classroom of any British university today, one expects to see students from many nations. Whether the subject is science, medicine, education, finance, geography or the many others on offer, there are Chinese, Indians, and Africans sitting amongst British students listening to the lecturer who may also come from another country. Education has become internationalised with the same core themes, so that students have become part of the global society. It is, however, too easy to assume that all these students have a common secularised technological mind-set, with or without allegiance to a particular religion that is departmentalised into their private lives. Nothing is further from the truth because under the outer necessities of books, lectures, seminars, exams and all that makes up the academic life there are a wide variety of issues students face that they find difficult to share with others.

Take, for example, the Asian student whose mother gave him a resin image of the Buddha that she had filled with money. This she said was to protect him whilst he was in the foreign land, and this the student genuinely believed. As it was heavy and could not be easily carried he wore a little image of the Buddha around his neck to bring him good fortune. Another student, this time from Africa and a professing

Christian felt the presence of spirits in her flat that disturbed her at night. She did not know what to do or who to talk to about it.

Most cultures and religions have some concept of an unseen world. The major world religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity all recognise the existence of spiritual beings and powers. These take many different forms, and are often seen as the cause of misfortune and affliction.¹ In the secularised West these beliefs have become the stuff of Hollywood horror films that are often dismissed as being mere superstition. Although this article is directed towards those working with international students it needs be noted that people from any background can face such issues. International students, however, face additional difficulties in that they lack the words to explain how they feel, and do not know to whom they can turn for help.

Paul Hiebert pointed out that between the pragmatic, scientific elements of life discussed in the classroom, and the cosmology of a world religion lies "folk religion".² This may be called the occult, animism, witchcraft, superstition, or even traditional culture. Folk religion occurs in every culture and is intertwined with world religions and their theology, priesthood and ascribed rituals.³ Also included would be many in the West who read their horoscope

1. Burnett, 2005

2. Hiebert, 1982

3. Burnett, 2005

every day, or the footballer who feels he only has a good game if he ties his boots in a special way or is the last of the team to leave the dressing room.

There are three questions that I have frequently been asked about the subject of the power of God and the unseen world. First, how can I establish a safe space in which a person would be free to share these sorts of things? Second, how can I tell the difference between mental health problems and those that are demonic? Thirdly, how can I help a person to be delivered from some form of spiritual affliction?

1. Establish Trust

In building meaningful relationships with people of other cultures one must recognise the necessity of building mutual trust. Mayers speaks of this as “The Prior Question of Trust”. He emphasises that we should continually keep in mind the question, “Does what I am doing, thinking, or saying have potential for building trust or potential for undermining trust?”⁴ It is true that along the way we will inevitably make mistakes, but this simple question will provide us the guidance needed. If one does make a mistake a sincere apology can often help to restore trust and enhance one’s friendship.

Secondly, when we consider the loose ways that native English speakers use words like occult, witchcraft and possession one can see the problems that can emerge in a cross-cultural situation. International students struggle to find the appropriate English words to communicate their actual thoughts and feelings partly because they have never learned these words, and the words they use may not be fully understood by a native English speaker. For example, the ideas relating to words like “witchcraft” or “ghosts” are quite different in Africa from those in Europe.

Thirdly, it is necessary to patiently listen to what the person is saying and not jump to preconceived ideas. It is essential that you do not react in an inappropriate way as this will immediately show to the person that you do not really understand what they are trying to say or empathise with their feelings. Do not criticise them for ideas you may initially think are irrational or simply impossible. Learn to listen, and listen to learn! Reflect back to the person by using expressions such as, “Am I understanding you correctly, you are

saying...” You could ask follow-up questions like, “At home what would you do in this situation?”

Finally, if appropriate, you could direct the person to some relevant passages from the Bible such as the accounts of Jesus dealing with sickness and evil spirits. You could talk about the promises Jesus made to those who follow him, and the many times He encourages us to pray. People are always willing for you to pray with them about such situations. You may like to suggest they share the problem with a more mature Christian or even consult a medical doctor.

2. Be Discerning

Another common question is “How can I know whether a particular situation is psychological or demonic?” This is a difficult and controversial question partly because it depends on how you understand the demonic. Here I will use the term “demonization” because it is the closest English term for the Greek verb “daimonizomai”, which Strong defines as “demon-possessed”.

It is necessary firstly to state that the Gospels provide evidence that Jesus considered the casting out of demons as a part of His mission on earth (e.g. Luke 13: 32), and that he made it a part of the mission of His disciples (e.g. Luke 9: 1). A Christian psychologist wrote, “We must, therefore, be very hesitant to accept any idea that Jesus was simply acceding to, or actively colluding with, a primitive misconception of the nature of mental illness. In any case, elsewhere, the Bible suggests that Hebrew culture did indeed have an understanding of mental illness as being separate and different from demonic activity or human evil (e.g. 1 Samuel 21:13).”⁵

Secondly, various forms of demonization have been observed by anthropologists in different parts of the world.⁶ They would consider spirit possession as an altered state of consciousness that involves experiences of being under the control of a powerful entity, such as a god, a demon, a devil or a ghost. A common feature of possession states is that the person feels and acts like his or her identity has been replaced by a spirit.⁷ Personally, I have seen only a few such cases, but I am convinced of their reality, and the need for exorcism in such cases.

4. Mayers, 1987

5. Cook, 1997

6. Lan, 1987; Leacock & Leacock, 1975; Lewis, 1989; Montgomery, 1976

7. Boddy, 1989



Thirdly, researchers have amassed considerable evidence suggesting that mental illness has never been the same the world over, but is inevitably shaped by the ethos of particular times and places.⁸ In any given time, those who minister to the sick (doctors, shamans or priests) inadvertently help to select which symptoms will be recognised as legitimate. As a result, the forms of mental illness from one place and time often look remarkably different from the forms in another. If mental illness and demonization are not simply different names for, or different models of understanding of the same thing, then we are left with two possibilities. Either they are unrelated phenomena, or else there is some kind of association between them. Of course, even if they are unrelated, they may still be confused with each other because of superficial similarities.

Roy Clements has proposed a holistic model to avoid the need to distinguish mental illness from demonization.⁹ It considers that each person is subject to physical influences (genetic/ body chemistry/ brain damage etc.), social influences (dysfunctional family/ trauma/ bereavement etc.) and spiritual influences (demonic attack etc.). An individual may therefore be afflicted by any of these, or a mixture of them. For example, Luke writes of a woman “who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years” (Luke 13:11) and Matthew of a “demon-possessed man who was blind and mute” (Matthew 12:22).

I find this approach helpful, because it allows us to take the physical, mental and spiritual aspects seriously as we seek to help a person in need. Satan often works through human weakness, and this may be expressed through some physical, psychiatric and/or spiritual problems.

3. Act Wisely

What should one do when facing a situation that you think could be demonic? First of all remember that your concern should be for the person themselves, and this will require you to continually show sensitivity and compassion. The extent of such affliction may vary from evil thoughts to actual control by a spirit of some form.

Second, you need to exercise discernment. Discernment is both a spiritual gift, which you may or may not have, but it is also what I would call Christian ‘common-sense’. With regards to common-sense, possible indicators could emerge by sensitively asking about: any history of mental

illness; any medication the person may be on; any change in personality they may have experienced, such as sudden anger or depression; any known personal sin for which they feel the need of forgiveness; any history of occult involvement; any previous abuse. On consideration of their answers you may need to encourage the person to seek medical advice.

Spiritual discernment is also a spiritual gift. In 1 Corinthians 12:10, Paul writes about ‘distinguishing between spirits’. It is at this point that you may find it necessary to ask for help from a Christian who has had more experience in dealing with people who are demonized. It would be wise to consult the pastor and/or leaders of your own church for advice and possible assistance.

Thirdly, before commencing any “spiritual ministry” I would suggest you consider the following:

- Seek God’s will and avoid being rushed into ministry.
- Remember we have authority because we are each under Christ’s authority.¹⁰
- Be humble in spirit; we are all learners.
- Work as part of a small team, and always have someone present of the same sex as the person.
- Pray continually for the protection of Christ for all involved (cf. Acts 19:13-17)
- The team must be in agreement as to the ministry and procedures used.
- Avoid making an unnecessary public spectacle.

Fourthly, deliverance ministry is essentially addressing the spirit in the name of Jesus and commanding it to depart. The following points are important:

- Pray – taking the power and authority of God to act (Luke. 10:17-20)
- Exercise spiritual gifts wisely. You may feel it right to quote verses of Scripture.
- There may be a need for the person to confess particular sins.
- You should exercise a word of authority. (You may need to make it clear to the person that this is not ‘magic’, and you are acting in the authority of Christ.)
- Struggle, coughing, retching, relief, freedom, and joy may accompany the departure. The person will often have a definite sense that “something” has departed.
- There may be a sense of uncleanness. Here it is necessary to speak about cleansing through the blood of Christ, and then pray that the person may know God’s forgiveness and acceptance.

8. Watters, 2011

9. Clements, 1996

10. Kraft, 1998

- Pray for the person to be filled with the Holy Spirit. (Luke. 11:24-26).

Finally, the person needs to be incorporated into a caring Christian fellowship in which they have Christian instruction, and are given a sense of new commission and purpose (Mark 5:18-20). There may be the need for some ritual in which any idols or unhelpful items are destroyed (Acts 19:19).

Final Comments

Most cases that you may meet will not be as dramatic as those described by anthropologists, but each situation is important for the person concerned. God wants people to be healed, lives to be made whole, and the Kingdom of God established. It is necessary to build a caring attitude, listening skills, and wisdom. This must be expressed in a quiet authority in the power of God over all the principalities and powers of darkness.

For a discussion guide on this article please see page 16.

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A Framework for Biblical Cosmology



Christians need to have a cosmology based on the teaching of the Bible. While secular ideas of materialism may be rejected by the Christian, it is easy to regard God as an absentee watchmaker: He has created the world and has now backed away, leaving the cosmos like a clock that ticks along on its own. This is a philosophy known as “Deism”. The Bible, however, rejects this idea and portrays God as One who is concerned about His creation and who is totally aware of what is happening.

BIBLICAL COSMOLOGY

1) The Creator God

“[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”
Colossians 1:15-17

The Bible clearly states that **God created all things including those that are visible and invisible**. The universe in which we live is more than the material elements that are so much part of our everyday experience. The Bible continually refers to an invisible aspect that our secular worldview hinders us in perceiving. This cannot simply be dismissed as a cultural hangover from Biblical times, but must be judged on Biblical teaching and empirical evidence from all over the world.

2) The Adversary, Satan

The Bible speaks of **Satan, or the Devil as a real personal spiritual being**. In three passages in the Old Testament (Job 1 and 2; Zechariah 3:1f; 1 Chronicles 21:1) it refers to Satan as a **heavenly**

supernatural being. In the New Testament, Satan is portrayed as the **primary enemy of God and humanity as a whole**. He is the one who tempts Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11), seeks to oppose his mission (Luke 8:12) and to destroy him (Luke 22:3; John 13:2), but who in turn will be defeated (John 16:11). In addition, the Old Testament refers to **fallen angels and demons** (Deuteronomy 32:17), and Paul in the New Testament writes of **“principalities and powers”** that he perceives of as being personal malevolent spiritual beings. The Gospel gives accounts of the **demonic afflicting human lives**, and tells of a **Saviour bringing deliverance**.

3) The Victorious Lord Jesus

No wonder many have considered this as a “spiritual warfare”, but this should **never be considered a conflict between equals**. God as creator and Lord of history is sovereign over all creation, including Satan who is no more than a rebellious creature. The Bible teaches that **Jesus’ coming has inaugurated the coming of the kingdom of God in power**. As Jesus said, *“But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you”* (Matthew 12:28). Through the cross Christ has **dealt Satan a fatal blow** and has **given us victory** over him. (John 12:31, 16:11, 33). This view was prominent in the writings of the early Church, and became known as *Christus Victor* – Christ is victor!

4) The Ongoing Battle

Is the Biblical view of the demonic normative (universal) or culturally conditioned? A cursory glance across the world shows that

people in some areas seek to **pacify the local river gods or mountain spirits**, while in other places people **fear witchcraft**, and in other areas they need to **give offerings to ancestors**. Different cultures reveal various expressions of evil, but behind them one can see a **common demonic activity aimed at hindering God's work and defeating God's people**.

To the Christian, Peter writes, *"Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"* (1 Peter 5:8). Satan and his host are not yet completely destroyed. They remain a danger, and for this reason **a Christian is called to be always on guard**. In Ephesians chapter 6 Paul reminds us that the war is still on.

THE CONFLICT—POINTS TO REMEMBER:

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:10-12).

1) Our conflict is not against people, but against the spiritual forces of evil.

Care should be taken that people of other faiths do not interpret the language of warfare as one of violence and political involvement. Ours is a message of **peace, hope and reconciliation**.

Paul also tells us that Satan **blinds the minds of non-believers**. *"In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God"* (2 Corinthians 4:4). It is with **compassion and prayer** that people come to see the glory of Christ.

2) God is not merely more powerful than Satan, but has a radically different nature.

When Christ was suffering on the cross he could have called down legions of angels to establish his kingdom. The Cross is the demonstration of victory through weakness, of love over hate, and of God's way over that of Satan. *"For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds"* (2 Corinthians 10:3, 4).

3) Paul encourages us to put on the full armour of God and stand (Ephesians 6:10-17).

Each piece of the armour stands for a Christian characteristic or discipline: truth, righteousness, the Gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God. **Prayer** is not mentioned as a piece of armour, but the attitude in which warfare should take place. *"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests"* (6:18a).





Breaking the Stalemate of Silence

Opening conversations about supernatural encounters



**Lynette
Teagle**

Lynette is Head of Learning and Development for Friends International. Based in Oxford, she is also working part-time on a PhD at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, researching aspects of identity change in Mainland and overseas Chinese students.

"Until I attended today's seminar, I thought I was going mad. I couldn't find anyone to talk to about the problems we have had with witchcraft in our family, especially since we became Christians. It felt like I lived in a different world!" This response from an African student, Ana, after a seminar on the topic of 'Gods, ghosts, spirits and ancestors' reminded me of my own experience as an international student 25 years earlier.

Growing up as a Christian in Singapore, spiritual realities were part of everyday life: the Hindu festival Thaipusam, when devotees in a trance-like state would throng the streets, bearing hundreds of barbs and spears pierced into bare flesh as acts of thanksgiving for answered prayer; annual Chinese traditions like Ching Ming, when tombs were swept and the smoke of joss sticks and burning paper money would fill the air as an offering to the ancestors. At school, friends who became Christians from those backgrounds talked openly about their experience of spiritual oppression, of the struggles to please parents who feared bad luck from punishing spirits. Roadside offerings of food to appease the malevolent spirits of accident victims, and Buddhist charms for good luck at exam time, were simply the norm.

In contrast, life in Britain seemed

strangely devoid of these realities - such topics were not raised in normal conversation, not even in church. I learned to set this part of my life experience aside, uncertain of the response I would get if I mentioned them. Like Ana, I began to question my own understanding of reality, realising that my norms were simply "not part of life in the UK".

This is a phenomenon which we repeatedly see in international student ministry (ISM) today. The reality, as David Burnett explains in his article in this issue, is entirely different. While his article tackles the practical issues of how the power of God confronts the unseen powers, this article takes a closer look at the challenges of creating a more open environment in British ISM, so that students are empowered to apply Biblical truth to the influence of unseen powers in their own contexts.

DIFFERENT WORLDVIEW, DIFFERENT APOLOGETICS

More than 20 years ago, Hiebert's teaching on the "flaw of the excluded middle" identified that the Gospel taught entirely from a purely materialistic Western worldview might provide an inadequate response to the more integrated non-Western worldview questions about the uncertainty of present life, the crises of the future and the unknowns of the past¹. Myers expresses the resulting conundrum most

1. Hiebert, P. "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle", *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. X, No. 1, January, 1982. <https://korycapps.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/p-hiebert-flaw-of-excluded-middle.pdf>

accurately when he writes²:

Christians in the West believe that God and Jesus Christ are part of the world of high religion, and that others are wrong to believe in Allah or some other high god. This means we believe that the critical question for evangelism is "Whose god is the true god?"...

For (non-Western) people who still hold a largely traditional view of the world, the critical question is not "What is true?" but rather "Who is the most powerful?" After all, it is the stuff in the excluded middle that affects their lives for good or ill. This means that news about a god whose Spirit is more powerful than curses, witch doctors and demons is very attractive.

This is why our approach to apologetics for non-Western students must differ from that for Western students.³ But there are further implications for evangelism and discipleship too.

Evangelism which focuses purely on questions of truth and the reliability of the Bible, for example, might fail to attract and answer those who have legitimate questions about demonic influences and traditional beliefs. Rachel Chard, who has lived and worked among African and Muslim students, comments on the former's seeming lack of interest in British church or Christian activities:⁴

Africans really do believe in Power: power of the unseen world and power in the seen world. When we talk about 'the power of God/prayer/the blood of Jesus/the Holy Spirit' we are not speaking the same language as most Africans, who take 'power' much more seriously than we do. Our tentative approach to prayer for healing or for deliverance will give the impression that our Christianity is lacking in expectation and trust in God's power. This almost certainly creates a gap between them and us and probably puts them off our churches and even the Gospel.

If we fail to equip students with an adequate Biblical cosmology, we run the risk that those who return home as disciples of Christ will encounter similar problems to those identified by Murphy:⁵

Usually [the early churches in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania] did not receive from their spiritual fathers, the missionaries, an adequate

Biblical and functional theology of the spirit world, power encounter, and spiritual warfare. Essentially they were left unprepared for the spiritual warfare into which they were being thrust as Christians.

The result in ISM is returnee Christians who are ill-prepared to face the challenges of everyday life in cultures where idol offerings are routinely made to bring greater prosperity and financial success, physical territories are perceived to be haunted by ghosts or evil spirits, and ancestral curses continue to hold entire families captive.

A STALEMATE OF SILENCE

These issues remain difficult to address even though our Bible studies routinely take students through the gospels, teaching that Jesus has power to heal and to expel evil spirits. There is, on the one hand, a perceived reticence in some British churches to address such topics and on the other, a reluctance on the students' part to volunteer their experience. The lack of a 'safe space' and the confidence to address such topics means that teaching on the unseen powers receives little or no mention, resulting in "a stalemate of silence". We thus need to begin by understanding the reasons for this silence, and here the complexity of the issue becomes apparent.

For ISM workers and volunteers, the most common reasons cited are:

Lack of personal experience – many workers and volunteers feel unable to discuss such topics purely because they have never encountered anything related to the unseen powers and would not know where to begin. This is particularly true for those with little or no lived experience in the non-Western world, or those who have lived in very monocultural environments, whose spiritual experience may be almost entirely Christian. This can even be true of Christians from overseas, such as the East Asian undergrad I recently met whose life until then revolved around being home-schooled and her parents' English-speaking international church. Thus she had lived to all intents and purposes sheltered from experiences her peers would have.

2. Myers, B. "The Excluded Middle." *MARC Newsletter*, June 1991, quoted by Murphy, E.F. *International Journal Of Frontier Missions*, Vol 10:4 Oct. 1993. http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/10_4_PDFs/03_Murphy.pdf

3. Teagle, P. "A tangle of impossibilities or exciting opportunities? Teaching the Bible to multicultural audiences", *INSIGHT* Summer 2015.

4. Chard, R. "How the unseen world impacts our outreach to African students". Seminar notes from FI January Conference 2017.

5. Murphy, E.F. *ibid*



Denominational bias – this is too large an issue to discuss here, but suffice to say that churches in Britain display a broad range of approaches in response to unseen powers. The more Pentecostal churches might deal with such issues on an almost weekly basis, but their expressions of faith or church subculture might not be understood by international students who are not yet believers. At the other end of the scale are the churches which, while focused on Biblical truth, may be concerned about subjective experience for fear that it may lead to excess or error. Yet because this concern mixes with a bias towards a Western mind-set, they may place very little emphasis on experiential faith.

“It only happens overseas, not in the UK” – many of those who serve on our international student ministry teams are equally, if not primarily, supporters of overseas mission. This can, however, create a dichotomous view which accepts that while cross-cultural missionaries might have encounters with unseen powers as part of their life overseas, such situations do not occur in Britain. Some might go as far as to suggest that such issues are irrelevant to international students who return to urbanised settings where folk religion and traditional practices must have, by now, been entirely replaced by modernity and technological advances.

Conversely, when international students were asked, the following reasons were given:

Inability to articulate their experiences – David Burnett identifies that students may “struggle to find appropriate English words to communicate their actual thoughts and feelings”, either because they have never learned these words or because there is a lack of appropriate vocabulary in the English language.⁶ One student confided that she did not know whether to tell her pastor that she had “had a bad dream, seen the Devil or had an evil spirit in her room”. Afraid of being misunderstood, she chose to remain silent and endured several weeks of broken nights with terrifying encounters before daring to seek help.

Lack of recognition of spiritual links – for many international students attending our seeker studies, the spiritual nature of their traditional practices is not always apparent. In my PhD research interviews with 20 Mainland and overseas Chinese students, the majority acknowledged a family background in ancestor worship. Interestingly, many of those whose first contact with Christianity was in the UK were quick

to refer to these as “only family traditions” or “superstitions from the past” which had no spiritual relevance. Those with some prior contact with Christians from their own country, however, were more aware of the implications and potential conflicts which might arise due to their conversion to Christ.

Fear that church leaders will not take them seriously – talking about experiences which have no equivalent in Britain, let alone those which are unpleasant or difficult, represents a risk for many international students. A Taiwanese postgrad tried to discuss her fears about the potential impact of the Hungry Ghost Festival on her impending exams and was told by her church leader, “Christians don’t need to be afraid of these things.” This brief response, albeit theologically true, kindly meant and gently spoken, was felt to be an insufficient response to her deep seated fears.

Finally, whether ISM workers, volunteers or students, all express **fear of being overwhelmed** by the issues which might be raised. On all sides, there is a concern to provide balance. The biggest challenge is that of providing a theologically accurate perspective which is contextualised both to the British church setting as well as to the international student context. Rachel Chard identifies a difference in theological outlook in African students which demonstrates the complexity of the challenge⁷:

The default position is that we think that Africans are too ‘over-the-top’ about God’s power and they think that we don’t believe in either the unseen world of spirits or even in God’s power. The result has often been a polarising of the two positions which is detrimental to both.

WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

Get clarity about our own perspective on the power of God. Whilst it might be fair to admit that we lack personal experience of unseen powers, the reality is that such encounters do occur in modern Britain, and there is an urgent need for Christians to have the Biblical grounding which will enable us both to handle power encounters with theological understanding, balance and confidence, as well as equip international students to face the questions posed by their own cultural backgrounds and traditions.

Give Scripture the space to speak. A sufficient understanding of Scripture should enable us to handle Bible studies and teaching in a way which demonstrates the place of unseen powers within the Kingdom of God and His sovereign power. How well

6. Burnett, D. “The power of God and the unseen world”, INSIGHT, this issue.

7. Chard, R., *ibid*.

do we discuss accounts of power encounters in the gospels, for example, where Jesus deals with evil spirits? It is important to ask questions which are designed to open up the discussion, giving room for students to reflect on their own experience from home, rather than being afraid that doing so will start unhelpful or unhealthy debate: "We see here that Jesus had authority over evil spirits. What fears do people in your country have of evil spirits? How do people understand unexplained supernatural events in your culture?" Of course, having given voice to these matters, there needs to be a repeated return to the fact that Jesus has power over all – now as well as then.

Listen for hints and ask more. My husband tells the story of how, having learnt the sound of a woodpecker in nearby woods many years ago, he now recognises the distinctive knocking even if it is far away. Much of learning to listen to students involves looking out for clues, even in their body language, recognising that there is more to a story than first appears. This often entails the building of mutual trust, giving time and space for longer conversations, more possible during one-to-one meetings. It's important to know that in pragmatic non-Western cultures, it is often the practical implications which demonstrate ingrained fears and beliefs, rather than explicit challenges to teaching or theology.

The issue of curses arises frequently among African Christians and Muslims while we tend to rarely, if ever, talk about the issue, apart from talking about ourselves as under the curse of sin and brought out from under it by Christ. The issue of cursing may be seen in a student's inability to wear something or to walk somewhere or to use a certain word. They have been told or suspect that someone has cursed this thing/route/word and so it would be dangerous to use it. To us this can seem completely at odds with their faith in Jesus.⁸

Learn to ask deeper questions about experiences.

While it is important to avoid leading and misleading questions ("Did you think that dream was given to you by an evil spirit?"), learning to ask deeper questions is one of the key skills of contextualisation. *African students will often have many superstitions which are not touched by the things we talk about. For Muslim Africans there may be fear of the evil eye. For 'Christian' Africans there may be family superstitions which they laugh about on one hand but are nevertheless bound by. We need to dig deeper, ask*

better questions to find out what they really think instead of seeking to get them to affirm what we are telling them.⁹

Use real-life experience to give people permission to talk. Overcoming students' reticence requires patience. I sometimes find it helpful to give an example from my own or others' experience, inviting students to reflect on whether they have had similar encounters. This has the added benefit of providing a neutral subject upon which both can comment without the student having to divulge details they may feel shy or embarrassed to mention.

Use or adapt tools that are designed to address Fear/Power worldviews. There are, admittedly, few resources available that address the specific issues regarding unseen powers with which international students come. It can be helpful to consult with Christians from non-Western backgrounds who often have a more developed understanding of the issues involved, as well as missionaries or cross-cultural workers who have lived and worked in those contexts. Newer resources, such as *The 3D Gospel*¹⁰, provide a useful rendering of the Bible story for those who are from Fear/Power backgrounds. These can be adapted for use in Bible studies or evangelistic messages.

It is up to us to break the stalemate. Our international student friends need us to do more than passively wait for them to bring up the subject. Our silence creates an inadvertent taboo, where students feel they can't speak up about whole areas of their experience. It takes a rare student – and a rare friendship – to feel safe (or indeed desperate) enough to break the taboo, end the silence and seek the answers they need. Quite simply, it is unfair of us to expect them to do so without our help.

Any spiritual experience which is not Christ-centred is, by definition, dark and fearsome, yet where else should students go for answers, but to their trusted Christian friends? Who – or what – will give them the answers they need, if we do not? Let us not allow the Enemy the opportunity of using this stalemate of silence to deepen those fears and keep people in ignorance of the Truth that will set them free.

8. Chard, *ibid.*

9. Chard, *ibid.*

10. Georges, J., *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame and Fear Cultures*, Timē Press, 2016





Reflections from a Taiwanese New Year



**Sue
Burt**

Sue is the Head of Returnee Ministry at Friends International. She has a passion to see international students discipled in a way that ensures their growth continues long after they return home.

I was arriving on New Year's Eve, planning to take advantage of the New Year holiday to spend time with friends who had returned home after studying in the UK (returnees).

Mei Ling's family home, close to the international airport in Taiwan, has often proved a convenient stopping place for the first night or two of my visits. I've also much appreciated the warm and generous hospitality shown by this close-knit traditional Taiwanese family. It was already late when we arrived at Mei Ling's home and while her mother was as warm and welcoming as always, she was clearly anxious that her daughter do something soon. On invitation I followed her upstairs where a table laden with food was waiting. It was important that Mei Ling give honour to their ancestors and offer this food to them. So she stood dutifully praying before the table.

The following morning we all travelled to the home of an elderly aunt where three generations of the family were gathering. There was the usual exchange of news and catching up on family events amidst laughter and fun with plenty of drinks and snacks. But at the centre of the celebrations was the ancestral tablet behind a table again laden with food. Quietly and without fuss, family members took it in turns to

stand before the tablet, kowtow and offer prayers to and for the ancestors. At the end of the morning came the part the younger members had been eagerly anticipating. Two braziers outside the home were lit and the teenagers had great fun throwing in piles of paper money, believed to smooth the passage of the ancestors into and through the afterlife.

Ancestor Veneration: The Beliefs Behind the Practice

A ritual practice that is based on the belief that deceased family members have a continued existence, take an interest in the affairs of the world, and possess the ability to influence the fortune of the living.¹

Ancestor Veneration in Taiwan combines elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, all merged into an expression of popular religion. These beliefs issue in an elaborate set of rituals to ensure the proper care of the deceased. As well as funeral rites, several annual festivals include ancestor ritual in times of family reunion.² Behind it all is a belief in a mutual obligation and interdependence between the living and the dead.

If you keep a good connection, they will bless you. Worshipping maintains a connected relationship. If you don't worship, they will become lonely.³

1. www.religionfacts.com, 2005

2. Apart from New Year, the most prominent of these is Ching Ming, where graves are cleaned, new money is burnt for the use of the deceased and sacrifices are offered in gratitude for blessings.

3. Interview with Taiwanese returnee, 23 May 2006

It is also believed that non-worshipped ancestors could get very angry and cause problems for the family.⁴

These beliefs sincerely held in traditional families and widely practised, raise huge dilemmas for Christians.

*If people become Christians, the line will be cut, there will be no heritage. There must be one person to carry on the traditions. The issue is not whether you worship God but whether someone will worship the ancestors. If not, that leads to a family crisis.*⁵

The prevalence of ancestral practice in Taiwan causes Bong Rin Ro to write:

*The problem of ancestor worship is probably the most crucial issue which Christians in Taiwan must face.*⁶

Observations and Reflections

1. Mei Ling's family exhibited many Biblical characteristics of care and concern for each other, where everyone was valued and included.
2. Inclusion extended to ancestors who had passed on. In their prayers they were honouring the legacy of former generations.
3. This was a happy time of fun and celebration which brought together the whole family across the generations – think Christmas in the West!
4. Those who sincerely hold to these beliefs care not just for their ancestors but also for their own passage through the afterlife if not properly honoured by their living family members.
5. The practices I observed 'crossed a line' from simply being grateful for, to also praying to, those who had already died. As such, a Christian would not be able to follow all these practices.
6. If Mei Ling were a Christian, and especially if she had become one while overseas, she would have faced an enormous dilemma. Should she distance herself from the whole event? And if so what message would she communicate?

This hypothetical dilemma is a very real one for many of our returnees who return to families and homes where such practices are integral to family life and the annual calendar.

*Taiwanese religion is conducted above all by families.*⁷

Of course it is not just Taiwan where such rituals are found. Ancestor veneration is widespread across East Asia and especially in societies influenced by Confucianism. Similar beliefs and practices are also found in parts of Africa. All cultures have beliefs about the dead and some will result in practices which conflict with Biblical teaching. Are these practices idolatrous or a part of culture that can be accommodated? How the returnee convert responds to such questions may challenge their identity within both family and society.

It also should be understood that Christians and churches within countries affected by these issues do not necessarily agree on how to deal with them. There are those who would argue for a distinction between the form and meaning of ancestor ritual and therefore have no great problem with observing some of the forms. Meanwhile others would argue that form cannot be that easily divorced from the idolatrous meaning implicit in the practices. One thing is certain – our international friends need to be prepared in advance to face these issues. Part of our role is to help returnees think through the balance between honouring parents and honouring God and where lines should be drawn. Decisions made and how they are implemented will have a huge effect on the returnee's growth as a Christian and their witness to family and friends.

The Value of First-hand Experience

For those involved in international student ministry, understanding needs to be our starting point. We cannot help others from a merely theoretical standpoint. Herein lies the value of both deep friendships with international students and of course returnee visits, seeing our friends in their home settings. The theoretical knowledge above was gained before my opening experience. Previously I had read about ancestor worship,

4. Interview with Taiwanese returnee, 2 June 2006

5. Interview with Taiwanese returnee, 21 May 2006

6. Ro: 181 (editorial comment)

7. Weller 1999: 341



asked questions, discussed it with East Asian friends and interviewees, and reflected on it. Yet it was observing it in a family context known to me which brought home the reality of this aspect of the returnee experience and the dilemmas it raises.

My experience on this occasion taught me that there is a world of difference between learning and discussing from a distance and being present to 'feel' the situation and observe context and reactions. Returnee visits enable us, to some extent, to 'get inside the skin' of our returnee friends and their lives, to develop a measure of empathy which should better equip us for preparing and supporting other returnees. They also keep us humble in case we think we've understood an issue and remind us of the need to be 'perpetual learners'.

*Simplistic responses or polarized antagonism do more harm than good.*⁸

And Finally...

During that New Year's Day morning spent with Mei Ling and her family, one question forming in my mind was what to do when we came to eat the food, which was clearly the intention. How should I respond as a Christian to food offered to 'idols', showing my hosts appropriate honour and respect? (See Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10:19-22). A refusal to eat would be interpreted as a rejection of their hospitality. God answered my prayers in a surprising way. Mei Ling, who had been a guest in my home in the UK, suddenly asked if I would give thanks and pray before the meal. So I was able to indeed give thanks to the Living God and dedicate the food to Him – in a language probably only understood by Mei Ling.

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Discussion Guide

The Power of God and the Unseen World

— *David Burnett*

1. Have you had any experience of a person who you consider may have been afflicted by some demonic influence? What made you think that the problem was demonic?
2. Imagine the case of a young Asian woman who comes to you saying that now she has become a Christian she is fearful that her deceased grandfather will be angry with her and cause her misfortune. Think through your reactions, what would you suggest to her, and how would you pray for her?
3. A young man has been complaining of terrible nightmares. When you visit his room you find he has a statue of a god on his bookcase. How would you address the matter of the statue and what would you suggest he does to deal with his problem?

Breaking the Stalemate of Silence

Opening conversations about supernatural encounters

— *Lynette Teagle*

1. Do you find that students are willing to talk about their spiritual experiences, or are they reluctant to do so? Have you been made aware of times when students might have attempted to share something but seemed to hold back? Why do you think this is?

2. To what extent do you agree with the reasons given for international student workers and volunteers' hesitation to invite discussion about unseen powers? What other reasons might there be?
3. Given the suggestions in the article, what else might we do to a) help students feel safe to talk more openly and b) encourage them to do so?

Reflections from a Taiwanese New Year

— *Sue Burt*

1. What do you consider the value of 'first hand experience'? Have you had personal experience where observing and participating in events has changed your perspective? If we can't make returnee visits, how can we grow in our understanding of issues faced by returnees? How should this affect our ministry priorities?
2. If Mei Ling had indeed become a Christian in the UK, how could we have prepared her for the challenges of family occasions such as the one described? What factors should be considered?
3. Are we able to identify with Mei Ling's wider family? What message might non-participation in these rituals put across? How could Mei Ling both honour God and honour her family on such occasions?



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